

*Folk art of Rural Pennsylvania by Frances Lichten. Published by Charles Scribner's Sons, NY*

## FROM THE SURFACE OF THE EARTH—FLAX

"The German-Town of which I spoke before  
 Which is at least in length one mile or more,  
 Where lives High German people, and Low Dutch,  
 Whose trade in weaving Linnen Cloth is much,  
 There grows the Flax, as also you may know,  
 That from the same they do divide the Tow;  
 Their trade fits well within their Habitation."

—Richard Frame—1692

In 1834 Anna Mari Miller took a piece of the fine homespun linen stored in her dower chest, chose set little cross-stitch patterns of stars and birds and flowers, arranged them symmetrically on the long linen panel, and embroidered them in red cotton, stitch by careful stitch, counting every thread. At one end she made a net panel for further embellishment and in it darned two ladies in wide white hoopskirts. In the same tiny cross-strokes she set down her name and the date. This long towel, purely decorative, served both to show off her skill with the needle and as an outlet for the love of embroidered linen, a taste for which was latent in all Palatine women. Ornamental needlework could not be indulged in until a way of life which permitted a few graces had been firmly established. This state of well-being seems to have arrived toward the end of the eighteenth century. Then, as embroidered dated linens indicate, the beauty-starved country women were able to find a little time in which to carry on the traditions of their European great-grandmothers with equal vigor, skill and grace—though how any woman could find heart to embellish a piece of homespun linen is to be marvelled at, when one considers the amount of labor consumed in the making of the fabric itself. Only a strong, smoldering passion for decoration could have induced her again to handle a piece of homespun linen, constructed literally out of unending toil, to labor on it once more with eye-consuming stitchery.

But they loved needlework, and from that time on, as specimens from their hands indicate today, young girls such as Barbara Byberin in 1808, Susann Diller in 1832, Marea Schaffer in 1834, Kadharina Kral in 1855, and even Madelin Deiner as late as 1859, got out their finest and best linen woven at home and their colored threads, and embroidered these long linen panels to store away in their painted chests, as part of their "*Haus steier*" (*Aussteuer*, or dowry).

In the days when Pennsylvania was first settled, in all rural districts as well as in many towns the home was the center of textile production; for many early settlers it was their only source of fabric. Homespun was a descriptive word indicating the place of manufacture. Nowadays, the adjective "homespun" means coarse or plain; sometimes it is followed by the word "virtue," as if to designate a special variety. But in the days when